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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

(X) Release () Excise () Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: () In Part (X) In Full ~~RECONTROL~~

() Classify as () Extend as () Downgrade to

Date: Declassify on Reason

FROM : Ambassador BUENOS AIRES

DATE: March 24, 1977

SUBJECT : An End to "The Time of Silence"

REF :

SUMMARY. President Videla's March 6 reference to a termination of "the time for silence" inspired considerable speculation about Argentina's political future. For the moment, the armed forces probably have in mind simply broader consultations with representatives of various social sectors. Neither the civilian politicians nor the public is demanding much more, and from the government's point of view, a limited "opening" may help stem a dangerous tendency toward the isolation of the armed forces in power.

1. During his March 6 return flight from a state visit to Peru, President Videla told reporters that "the time for silence is ending" and that during 1977 consultations would be undertaken with political leaders and representatives of other sectors. These consultations, according to the President, would be part of a search for "political definition," and would mark a new phase of the National Reorganization program which he termed the "phase of creativity."

2. Videla's statements were warmly welcomed in the news media. Speculation as to their significance would have been normal under any circumstances, but it was further encouraged by the fact that his comments coincided with a flurry of activity connected with the approaching anniversary of the March 24, 1976 coup: all three armed services have held separate meetings at the general officers level to evaluate the first year of military government; the junta has made its appraisal based upon the reports of the three services; church authorities have drafted a confidential report that will soon be presented to the junta; rumors have circulated freely, although apparently without foundation, concerning impending changes in government structure ("fourth man" theme) and cabinet personnel (especially Martinez de Hoz and/or his chief aides); and labor leaders discussed (but rejected) making another attempt at convoking a plenum before March 24.

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3. We have been told that Videla's airborne remarks were a slip on his part, but an indirect source in the presidential secretariat claims that last week's army meeting endorsed the president's call for a dialogue. The consensus of journalistic, political and official comment we have heard and read supports our own view that the government does not have in mind a "political opening" in the sense of a quickened, purposeful move toward restoration of civilian political participation in the government. Despite the lack of specifics as to the form and substance of the proposed consultations, we believe that the government's plans do not include (a) any kind of elections whatsoever; (b) discussions with political parties per se (as opposed to individuals who are politicians); or (c) a timetable for renewed civilian political participation.

4. Interior Minister Harguindeguy sounded quite categorical on these points when he offered his "personal interpretation" of Videla's remarks. On March 17, after the Army's general officers meeting, Harguindeguy told reporters that the end of "the time for silence" meant that the "phase of creativity" would evolve with individual contributions from patriotic, talented and intelligent Argentines: "I do not interpret the president's comments to mean that the closing of the period of silence in any way signifies initiation of a dialogue with political groups."

5. The great majority of Argentines, including most civilian politicians, are neither surprised nor particularly disappointed that the junta is not considering a return to the norms of civilian politics in the near future. On the contrary, they appear to be satisfied with the prospect of having their views considered by the government. Peronists and Radicals have told us that their parties are totally unprepared for electoral participation. Argentine workers are primarily concerned about their salaries and standard of living, and, for them, an immediate return to civilian government is not an issue that raises much ardor at this point. The track record of Argentina's current group of civilian politicians, and particularly their shabby performance during the pre-coup period, does not inspire confidence on the part of most Argentines.

6. In the past year, the junta has quietly and informally consulted informed and influential citizens, and the "opening" to which Videla referred may simply involve intensifying, publicizing and institutionalizing this practice. If so, it would be the type of cautious, limited step typical of this government; a measure designed to suggest progress in the political field but one devoid of explicit promises as to outcomes. Certain sectors within the government have undoubtedly conceived more involved and detailed proposals for an eventual shift from military to civilian rule. For now, however, these exercises amount to contingency planning rather than the drafting of proposals for near-term implementation.

7. The decision to initiate a "political opening" of any kind is important evidence that the junta and the armed forces are sensitive to the danger that the military in power may become, or be widely perceived as, isolated from the remainder of society. Among other things, the government's human rights record and its refusal to provide the media with information on what transpires

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in government councils are contributing to the image of a government going its own way, oblivious to public opinion and concerns. That is an image that the government can ill afford, and one that it may be trying to correct through broader consultations with representative Argentines.

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